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Limits narrower, penalties tougher?

Open attack on official secrecy plan in Britain

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An attempt by the British Government to chart new policies for safeguarding official secrets has run into trouble in Parliament.

The proposals were submitted to the House of Commons by the Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, in the form of a government white paper outlining a fresh approach to official secrecy and proposing the dismantling of laws dating back to 1911.

But what Mr. Rees argued was a liberal and sensible set of arrangements was criticized by members of Parliament of the leading parties as opening the way to a system arguably more restrictive than the present one.

Mr. Rees also was attacked by members of his own Labour Party for failing to honor a 1974 promise to introduce a freedom-of-information act.

Under the 1911 Official Secrets Act, journalists and others often find themselves under government criticism for publishing material deemed "sensitive" by the authorities. Many people have ended up in court facing criminal charges.

A brake was felt

Newspaper editors and publishers have long thought the existing laws acted as a severe brake on open discussion of important matters.

Mr. Rees's proposals aim to narrow the range of topics meriting secrecy safeguards, but they also make it plain that the government would act with severity if it was thought guidelines had been infringed upon.

The types of information Mr. Rees wants most to protect encompass intelligence and security, but his critics are saying the suggested new laws could be used to cover a wide range of material.

The 1911 act has few defenders. It has been described as a "blunderbuss," enabling the government to declare secret anything it does not want divulged.

In 1974 the Labour Party promised in its election manifesto to introduce a freedom-of-information act, but this has not happened. Claims by Mr. Rees in the House of Commons that the new regulations would be a step toward such an act were derided by Conservatives, Liberals, and Labourites alike.

Access refused

Last year Prime Minister James Callaghan undertook to make available to reporters the various official working papers on which new government proposals were based. But when the editor of The Times (London) asked earlier this month to see the documents supporting a new "white paper" on official secrecy, he was refused access to them.

Most journalists and authors in Britain regard government attitudes to official information as unreasonably restrictive. In a book of journalistic memoirs published earlier this year, the recently retired and highly respected political editor of the Sunday Times, James Margach, declared that one of the main objectives of British prime ministers when taking office is "to reinforce the conspiracy of secrecy, to preserve the sanctity of government behind the walls of Whitehall's forbidden city."

In a recent editorial The Times accused Mr. Callaghan of being "a prime minister in the traditional mould" in this respect.

There is no prospect that laws based on the new white paper will get into the statute books in this parliamentary session, but the news media in Britain are concerned that regardless of which party — Labour or Conservative — wins the coming general election, something close to the Rees proposals eventually will become law.